

Learning, identity and self-orientation in youth

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to describe what is significant for youth learning in late modern society, as seen in relation to learning in childhood and in adulthood. It starts by outlining a modern understanding and theory of learning as comprising a cognitive, an emotional and a social/societal dimension. On this basis it is pointed out that what especially characterizes learning in youth is that it is always connected to and marked by the process of identity development. However, the concept of identity has also undergone profound changes in late modernity. Therefore the article concludes by suggesting the term 'self-orientation' as the central concept of contemporary youth learning processes.

Keywords

identity, identity development, identity problems, learning, self-orientation, youth, youth education, youth learning

The identity development process nowadays is interesting for us because we ourselves experience having to select our own identity and lifestyle. We think a lot about who we want to be, the viewpoints we want to represent, the food we want to eat, the work we want to do, and if we want to join a religion.

We are very much the main characters in our own lives because we must constantly reflect and make conscious decisions. We have to spend a lot of time considering personal interests, the possibility for personal development, and other topics that can be related to ourselves.

Not least do we experience confusion concerning choices in life, because there is nobody to tell us what is right. We have to listen to our inner voice, knowing that we risk making the wrong or merely incompetent choices which we ourselves will be responsible for. (Klyvø et al., 2000: 3–4)

This quotation is from the concluding report in a project entitled 'The development of identity in reflexive modernity', written by a group of first-semester students at Roskilde University (RUC). The content is not unusual, but a remarkably clear formulation of something that practically all young people are struggling with today and which has a far-reaching influence on their learning processes. Today all young people are very preoccupied with who they want to be, because they experience that there are some crucial choices to be made, that they will have to make them themselves, and that they will also have to bear the consequences on their own. For good or for bad, they inevitably experience that they are the main characters in their own lives in a way that is completely different from what was at all possible previously. Even though a huge amount of advice and guidance is available, in the final analysis they have only themselves to rely on. They must always 'listen to their inner voice' because there are innumerable possibilities that can be full of tensions and contradictions and they themselves are often very ambivalent, balancing as they do between the demand that everything must be sensational and the fear of not being able to manage.

However, to understand what this implies for learning, we need a learning concept encompassing more than merely acquiring knowledge and skills and thus corresponding to the modern understanding of competence, which comprises the totality of capacities that can be mobilized, including personal ability and willingness to undertake such mobilization. Therefore, in this article I start by exploring learning in general and the most important differences between learning in childhood, youth and adulthood. From this angle I then focus on identity development today, and in particular on the relation between identity and education in youth.

THE CONCEPT OF LEARNING

The theoretical basis of the reflections on learning in the following is the comprehensive and contemporary learning concept developed in my recent book *The Three Dimensions of Learning* (Illeris, 2002). This concept – which has received much interest in relation to adult education research (Illeris, 2003) – brings together central points from a wide range of different non-behaviourist American, British, European Continental, Nordic and Russian learning theories in a common general understanding. In doing so it differs from mainstream learning theory by taking in emotional,

motivational, social and societal angles as being equally as important as the cognitive side of learning, and by including such issues as mis-learning, defence and resistance as important elements of the conception. This also makes the theory well suited as a point of departure for exploring the issues of contemporary learning and identity development in youth.

Learning in general is understood as all the processes leading to permanent capacity change, whether it be physical, cognitive, emotional or social in nature, and which do not exclusively have to do with biological maturation. This means that the learning concept also spans such functions as personal development, socialization and qualification, as the differences between these terms mainly concern the perspective that is adopted. Thus when I deal with learning in youth, I refer to the whole register of mental and capacity development and readjustment. One of the central points of this concept is that these functions can only be separated analytically and not in reality.

Simultaneously, the concept also implies that all learning is part of a certain structure covering two very diverse types of processes and three dimensions. The two types of process are closely integrated and both must be active before learning can take place. On the one hand, there are interaction processes between the learner and the surroundings and, on the other hand, there are the inner mental acquisition and elaboration processes, by means of which impulses from the interaction are united with the results of earlier learning. The interaction processes are social and cultural in nature and in general follow a historical-societal logic, i.e. they are fundamentally dependent on how and when they take place, as the interaction possibilities are different in different societies and different historical epochs. Conversely, the acquisition processes are psychological in nature and in general follow a biological-structural logic, i.e. they follow the patterns that have been genetically developed through the ages as part of the development process of the species.

In addition, the acquisition processes always include two integrated sides: the cognitive or knowledge and skills side, and the emotional or psychodynamic side. During the pre-school years the two sides of the acquisition processes gradually split away from each other, but they are never totally separated (cf. Damasio, 1994; Furth, 1987). All cognitive learning always has an emotional component which is marked or 'obsessed' by the emotional situation prevalent during learning, for example whether the motivation was pleasure, necessity or even compulsion. All emotional learning also contains rational elements; a knowledge or understanding of the matters in question.

In this manner, learning will always include three integrated dimensions, which may be termed cognitive, emotional and social-societal. Through the cognitive dimension, knowledge, skills, understandings and, ultimately, meaning and functionality are developed. Patterns of emotion and motivation, attitudes and, ultimately, sensitivity are developed through the emotional dimension. Through the social-societal dimension, potentials for empathy, communication and cooperation and, ultimately, sociality are developed. Figure 1 illustrates the connection between the two types of process and the three dimensions that are active in any learning and which must always be included if one wishes to form a complete picture of a learning situation or process.

The results of learning are stored in the central nervous system as dispositions that can be described as schemes or mental patterns. With respect to the cognitive

dimension of learning, one typically speaks of schemes or, more popularly, of memory. In the emotional and the social-societal dimensions, one would employ terms such as patterns or, more popularly, inclinations. Under all circumstances, it is decisive that the results of learning are structured before they can be retained. This structuring can be established in various ways, and on this basis it is possible to distinguish between four different levels of learning that are activated in different contexts, imply different types of learning results, and require more or less energy. (This is an elaboration of the concept of learning originally developed by Jean Piaget, cf. Illeris, 2002.)

When a scheme or pattern is established, it is a case of *cumulative* or mechanical learning, characterized by being an isolated formation, something new that is not a part of anything else. Therefore, cumulative learning is most frequent during the first years of life, but later occurs only in special situations where one must learn something with no context of meaning, for example a telephone or pin code number. The

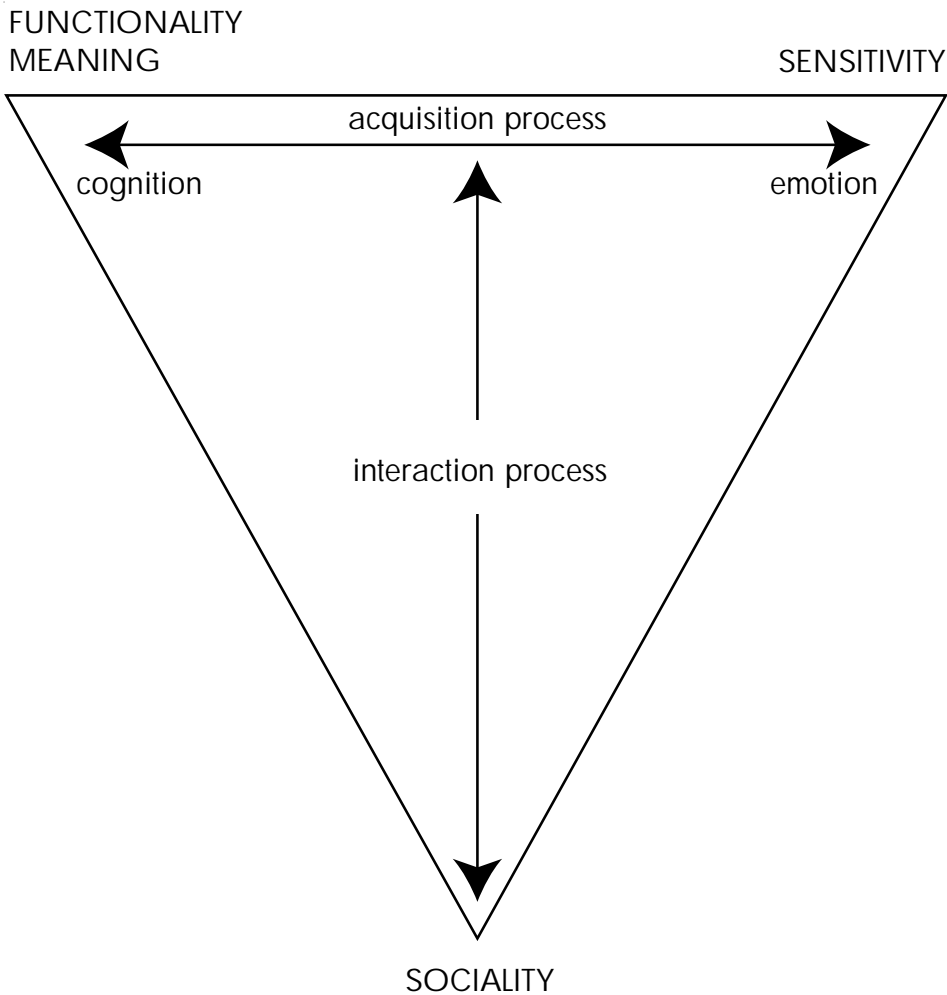


Figure 1 The processes and dimensions of learning

learning result is characterized by a type of automation that means that it can only be recalled and applied in situations mentally similar to the learning context.

By far the most common form of learning is termed *assimilative* or learning by addition, meaning that the new element is linked to a scheme or pattern that is already established. One typical example could be learning in school subjects that are precisely built up by means of constant additions to what has already been learned, but assimilative learning also takes place in all contexts where one gradually develops one's capacities of a cognitive, emotional or social-societal nature. The results of learning are characterized by being linked to the scheme or pattern in question in such a manner that it is relatively easy to recall and apply them when one is mentally oriented towards the field in question.

However, in some cases, situations occur where something takes place that is difficult immediately to relate to any existing scheme or pattern; this is experienced as something one cannot really understand. But if it is something one is determined to acquire, this can take place by means of *accommodative* or transcendent learning. This type of learning implies that one breaks down (parts of) an existing scheme and transforms it so that the new situation can be linked in. Thus one both relinquishes and reconstructs something, and this can be experienced as painful and something requiring energy. The result of the learning is characterized by the fact that it can be recalled and applied in many different, relevant contexts. It is typically experienced as having got hold of something which one really has internalized.

Finally, in special situations there is also a far-reaching type of learning that has been described as *transformative* learning (Mezirow, 1991). This learning implies what could be termed personality changes and is characterized by simultaneous restructuring in the cognitive, the emotional and the social-societal dimensions, a break of orientation that typically occurs as the result of a crisis-like situation caused by challenges experienced as urgent and unavoidable, making it necessary to change oneself in order to get any further. Transformative learning is thus both profound and extensive and can often be experienced physically, typically as a feeling of relief.

In relation to these four types of learning, it is important to note that together they characterize what happens when somebody actually learns something. But an adequate learning concept must also relate to what takes place in the frequent situations where somebody could learn something but does not, or perhaps learns something quite other than what had been intended. This concerns matters such as mislearning and mental defence, distortion or resistance, which, naturally, can be due to miscommunication, but in our complex late-modern information society must necessarily also be generalized and take more systematized forms, because nobody can remain open to the gigantic volumes of impulses we are faced with. I shall not deal in a general manner with these matters here but shall return to them in a later more definite context.

To sum up: what has been outlined is a concept of learning which basically is constructive in nature, i.e. it is assumed that the learner him or herself actively builds up his/her learning as mental structures that can be termed, for example, meaning, functionality, sensitivity and sociality. But in contrast to classical constructivist and social-constructivist concepts, it is pointed out here that the mental structures are built up in interaction with different types of processes and in the three different, but always interconnected dimensions.

This more complex concept of learning is of great importance when one

specifically wishes to deal with certain learning processes, for example, those that mark learning during youth. It establishes that there are different types of learning which are widely different in scope and that the whole field must always be in the picture, and that, for example, one cannot understand cognitive learning without also considering what happens in the emotional and social-societal dimensions.

LEARNING AND THE PHASES OF LIFE

On a general level, there are considerable differences between the nature of learning in different phases of life. Life-span theory usually distinguishes between the four main phases in the human life-course: childhood, youth, adulthood and mature adulthood (cf. Illeris, 2003; Jensen, 1993). This means that they operate with a youth phase that is usually understood as a transition between childhood and adulthood. For a broad understanding of the special nature of learning in this youth phase it is therefore adequate to look at the differences between learning in childhood and in adulthood and subsequently regard the youth phase as a transition period between these two.

Learning in childhood could be described as a campaign to conquer the world. The child is born into an unknown world and learning is about acquiring this world and learning to deal with it, in parallel with this being made possible by biological maturation. When viewed in relation to later phases of life, two learning-related features are most prominent, especially in the small child. In the first place, learning is *comprehensive* and *uncensored*. The child throws itself into everything possible, and is limited only by its biological development and the nature of its surroundings. Secondly, the child places utmost *confidence* in the adults around it. So to speak, it has only those adults to refer to, without any possibility of evaluating or choosing what the adults present it with – and must, for example, learn the language they speak, the culture of which they are a part, etc.

This is basically the case throughout the whole period of childhood and until puberty. In principle the child's capturing of its surroundings is uncensored and trusting; its endeavour is to make use of the opportunities that present themselves in an unlimited and indiscriminate fashion. But in the complex world of today, apart from the immediate surroundings, the child inevitably meets with a great diversity of mediated or secondary possibilities for experience or patterns of meaning, not least from the mass media or from its friends. This complicates the situation and marks the later period of childhood today, makes learning far more unclear and contradictory, and provokes defence, selection and mistrust and thus erases the uncensored, trusting approach, which, however, must still be maintained as the basis of learning in childhood.

Learning in adulthood is the other side of this picture. Being an adult essentially means that one is capable of and willing to take responsibility for oneself and one's actions. In our society this formally happens at the age of 18, but in reality this takes place gradually in the course of the increasingly lengthy period of youth. From the point of view of learning, in principle being an adult also means that one takes responsibility for oneself, i.e. that consciously or less consciously one selects and decides what one wants to learn and not to learn. For in our complicated modern society the amount of what one can learn far outstrips what any person can manage

to learn, and this applies not only to the content of learning but also to attitudes, modes of understanding, communication possibilities, patterns of action, lifestyle, etc. Selection becomes a necessity.

In principle, adults themselves would carry out and take responsibility for this selection. But even this would be completely impossible. This is why today people have to develop a kind of automatic selection mechanism. The German social psychologist, Thomas Leithäuser, has described this selection mechanism as 'everyday consciousness' (Leithäuser, 1976, cf. Illeris, 2002), which functions in the way that one develops some general pre-understandings within certain thematic areas. When one meets with influences within such an area, these pre-understandings are activated so that if elements in the influences do not correspond to the pre-understandings, they are either rejected or distorted to make them agree. In both cases, this results in no new learning but, on the contrary, often the cementing of the already-existing understanding. Through everyday consciousness, to a high degree adults take responsibility for their own learning and non-learning in a manner that seldom involves any direct positioning. On a more general level, learning in adulthood is fundamentally characterized by the following:

- adults learn what they want and what is meaningful for them to learn;
- adults draw on the resources they already have in their learning; and
- adults take as much responsibility for their learning as they want to take (if they are allowed to).

(Illeris, 2002: 219)

However, just as children's basic learning patterns are often erased by the increasing and complex secondary learning possibilities, adults' learning, especially in educational contexts, can be strongly marked by the forms of institutionalized learning in school that they experienced and accustomed themselves to in childhood and youth. When adults enter an institutionalized education programme, there is a distinct tendency for them to slip into the well-known pupil role where the control and responsibility are left up to the teacher. This is the easiest way, on the face of it, and often the teacher is also inclined to take on the traditional and secure controlling teacher role.

On the basis of these brief descriptions of important features of learning in childhood and adulthood, learning in youth can basically be described as a gradual transition from the uncensored, trusting learning of childhood to the selective and self-controlled learning of adulthood. Even though this picture on both sides is extremely complicated by the communication and information forms of late modernity, it is nevertheless precisely this transition that fundamentally lays down the conditions for learning during the youth phase.

It typically begins with 11–13-year-old children becoming more restless and sceptical in school and other learning situations controlled by others. At the beginning their resistance to adult-controlled learning is unsure and diffuse. It gradually becomes stronger and more conscious, and reaches its peak at the age of 14–15, typically in the form of rebellion and a struggle for power. Finally, in youth education programmes and sometimes also far into higher education study programmes, the situation takes on yet another character. Now, to a certain extent, the study programmes are self-chosen, and in principle the possibility exists of changing or

dropping out at the same time as the young people gradually start to target their learning. In this way rebellion and resistance become mixed with the possibility of making one's own choice, and the power battle is mixed with or takes on the character of argumentation and negotiation.

But, simultaneously with this development in the emotional and social dimensions, a crucial development also takes place in the cognitive area: the transition from the concrete operational to the formal operational stage, which, according to Piaget, concludes the cognitive development on the structural level. Around the onset of puberty one acquires a new possibility for thinking and learning abstractly and logically-deductively.

However, this assumption has subsequently received much criticism. On the one hand, far from all adults are capable of thinking formal-operationally in the mathematical-logical sense implied by Piaget's definition. Empirical studies show that this is the case for fewer than 30 percent in Great Britain, but simultaneously confirm that at the start of puberty a crucial development occurs in the possibilities for abstract thinking and learning, making it justified to speak of a new cognitive phase (Shayer and Adey, 1981). On the other hand, it has been claimed that at later periods important new cognitive possibilities can be developed, extending far beyond the formal-operative. Stephen Brookfield, has summed up this critique by pointing to four possibilities for learning which, in his opinion, are first developed during adulthood: the capacity to think dialectically, the capacity to make use of practical logic, the capacity to realize how one can know what one knows (meta-cognition), and the capacity for critical reflection (Brookfield, 2000).

The conclusion to all this must be that in puberty, physiological maturation takes place in the central nervous system which makes a new type of abstract and stringent thinking and learning possible, enabling one to operate context-independently with coherent systems of concepts, and that through youth and adulthood this ability can be further developed in the direction of, *inter alia*, formal-logical, practical-logical, dialectical, meta-cognitive and critically reflexive thinking and learning. Thus, in the case of learning in youth a new cognitive capacity is present to understand and acquire large-scale conceptual contexts, that to a high degree characterizes learning motivation during the years of youth. One is determined to discover how things are connected and this applies to personal as well as social, natural-scientific, societal, political and religious matters.

Thus, the growing urge for independence and the increasing need to understand how the young and their surroundings function and why this is the case are the basic features of learning during youth. Young people increasingly want to take on the responsibility for their own learning and non-learning, they want to select and reject for themselves, and in this connection they want to understand what they are dealing with and their own roles and possibilities. However, the situation is extremely complicated by the duality of late modernity: on the one side, the apparently boundless degrees of freedom and volumes of information; and, on the other side, a far-reaching, indirect controlling process on the part of parents, teachers, youth cultures, mass media and formal conditions for options. In the area of learning, the transition from child to adult has also become a lengthy, complex and ambiguous process with floating contours and unclear conditions and targets.

YOUTH, RESPONSIBILITY AND IDENTITY

From a psychological perspective, as clearly illustrated in the opening quotation, what is primarily central in learning by young people is identity development, and it makes itself felt in all possible contexts and in many different ways that can be both ambivalent and unclear – also for the young people themselves. The question of responsibility has a central position and may be regarded as a good example of the complexity of the situation.

On the face of it, it is very simple. On the one hand it is part of young people's development that they gradually both can and want to take over responsibility for their own learning. On the other hand, it is the declared aim of society, the school and the parents that they should gradually assume this responsibility. Why, then, is it so complicated?

Viewed from the perspective of the young, there is an almost interminable range of choices to be made, and from the time they were very small they have been told repeatedly in all possible direct and indirect ways, that they must choose what they really want to do – what feels exactly right for them. In late modernity, the range of situations and possibilities for choice have increased to the practically limitless. From early childhood this is manifested, in particular, in options for consumption – toys, videos, candy, clothes, etc. – but also in activities and social relations, and children constantly see and hear adults in numerous choice situations. In addition, the choices almost always appear to be and are presented as being free. You can choose what you want and the only thing you must take into account is what you really want. Therefore, you must constantly 'listen to your inner voice' which is actually something that often requires a great deal of sensitivity and self-understanding that can only be developed gradually by means of the unending range of choices, rejections and new choices.

At one time, identity was something one developed and, to a great extent, inherited – something that was largely framed by one's gender, class, family, ethnicity and where one lived. Now one can apparently choose everything oneself. While matters such as gender and ethnicity are given, it is energetically denied – not least by young people themselves – that this makes any difference, or it is something that is applied, interpreted and modelled in the identity process parallel with other matters. The possibilities are, in principle, endless. One can always make a new choice and continue to do so – but it is one's own responsibility and equally one's own fault if the choice is not right. It is not strange that the young are virtually identified with this endless and absolutely decisive process of choice and identification and that there is a tendency for everything to be seen and experienced in this perspective. There is no way around it; it is a matter of one's life and happiness.

All this is different from the perspective of the school, the parents and society. While it is certainly very crucial that young people make the right choices, what is right can only be decided by the individual to the same extent as the sum of the choices fits in with the needs of the society. This concerns not only educational level and occupational choice, but just as much choices of consumption and lifestyle in the widest sense, of maintaining and continuing what is presented as the free market society. If too many people do not consume enough, and if too many do not choose the stressed, globalized lifestyle of late modernity, we cannot maintain economic growth and we will lag behind in the international competition.

The choice is not nearly as free as young people think. The individual has a number of internal dispositions and unconscious experiences that set a limit, and there also exist numerous mechanisms that serve the purpose of all of us making the right choice, at the same time as we maintain the notion of free choices and believe in them as the best thing in the world. While it is, of course, correct that there are far more possibilities for choice than previously, much is established as unconscious pre-structuring in the individual, or they are patterns and notions that have been adopted insensibly and are fertilized every day in the mass media, advertisements, etc.

Youth is a transition phase but it is fundamentally, now as earlier, a transition and a pass to a certain type of society; a society that has already set the framework and influenced the individual up through childhood, and a society that is so diverse, opaque, and in many ways disjointed and self-destructive that it must of necessity be a transition that is insecure, ambivalent, searching, floating and changing with an unclear course towards an unclear goal.

In this way, the processes of choice and identity are woven into a fundamental and unclear contradictory relationship, which in its very essence has to do with young people having to learn what society needs while experiencing it as their own free choice. They must construct themselves; they must know and experience that they are completely their own construction, but this must be done within a framework with limited room for manoeuvre. They must all individually and voluntarily learn to choose (almost) the same.

THE CONCEPT OF IDENTITY

There is nothing new in the development of identity being perceived as a process that, first and foremost, takes place in the phase of youth and, conversely, that youth is perceived as a stage of life psychologically focused on the formation of an identity that one can build on for the rest of one's life. The classical identity concept was primarily drawn up by Erik H. Erikson, especially in his book *Identity, Youth and Crisis* (Erikson, 1968). The word 'identity' itself derives from the Latin *idem*, which means 'the same' and has to do with the experience of being the same or recognizable both to oneself and others in changing situations. This also points to the duality in the identity, so central to Erikson's concept, namely that one is an individual creation, a biological life, while simultaneously being a social and societal being. Therefore, identity is always an individual biographical identity, an experience of a coherent individuality and life-course, at the same time as being a social, societal identity, an experience of a certain position in the social community.

In this way there is a striking parallel between Erikson's concept of identity and the concept of learning outlined earlier. In both cases, there are two linked characteristics that always coexist and work together. Corresponding to Erikson's personal side of identity is the individual acquisition process in learning; corresponding to Erikson's social side of identity is the social interaction process of learning. Thus, from the point of view of learning, identity development can be understood as the individually specific essence of total learning, i.e. as the coherent development of meaning, functionality, sensitivity and sociality. As shown in Figure 2, its core area can be placed around the meeting between the two basic processes of learning.

However, if we return to the youth phase in our present post-modern society, it is

clear that both Erikson's notion of a more or less fixed identity as the goal, and identity confusion as the frightening counter picture, must be relativized today. When one of society's most central and direct requirements of its members is that we must always be flexible and ready for change, a fixed, stable identity becomes problematic. When older people are often criticized and rejected by the labour market because they are inflexible, this has precisely to do with the fact that over the years they have built up stable identities and self-understandings, which they cannot or will not change.

Simultaneously, the demand for such a targeted identity process implied a great challenge to be met with rebellion and resistance, and these could also be important elements in building up identity. But today it can be difficult to see what a rebellion should be targeted at, because parents, teachers and other counsellors are usually well-meaning, understanding people, there is great scope for personal choice on the

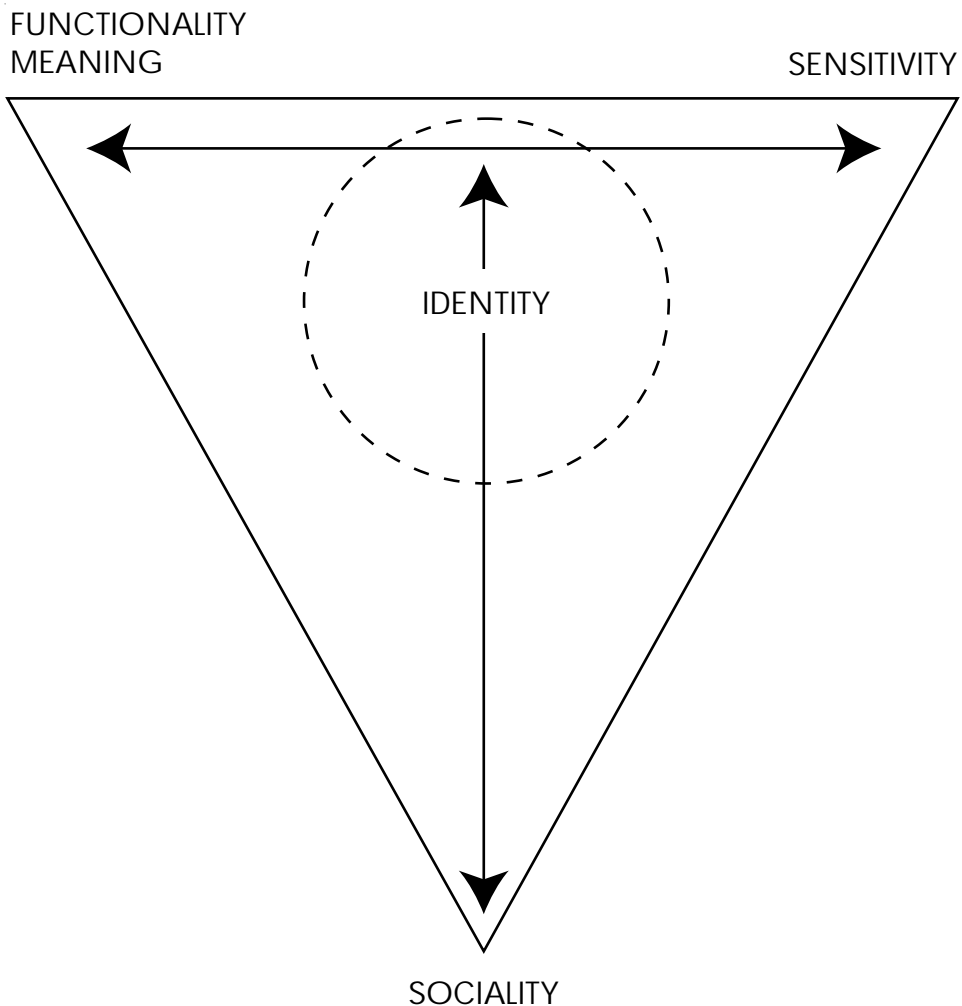


Figure 2 The position of identity in the structure of learning

intimate level, and on the large societal and global levels everything is mixed into an impenetrable, unclear confusion of power, manipulation, experts and propaganda, making it difficult to canalize any rebellion. Confusion is almost a matter of course, and the requirement is to be able to live with this confusion, to be able to manage and handle the incoherent, changing and always risky world of which one is a part.

In spite of its being criticized and to some extent outdated, Erikson's theory is still extremely interesting, partly because it is the fundament to which direct or indirect reference is most often made in the discussions, and partly because it so unambiguously positions identity as something which one acquires oneself, develops, builds up, constructs – or learns. One has, naturally, some genetic dispositions. Identity cannot be just anything at all – but is nonetheless strongly marked by the learning possibilities offered by the life of the individual and the way in which the individual relates to them. The theory also provides a clear picture of identity as a stable formation, which at the same time is susceptible to influence, fundamentally developed through a crisis-laden process that is transformative in nature and the central development process during the period of youth.

In relation to the learning concept outlined at the beginning of this article, on the basis of Erikson's theory identity formation can therefore in general be described as a holistic learning process that in a significant manner includes and influences the whole field of learning. Even though there have been clear general changes in the nature of the identity – so far-reaching that some researchers today are of the opinion that the very term is misleading – it is still a process of this comprehensive nature that is the central rationale of learning in the period of youth.

IDENTITY PROBLEMS AND NARCISSISM

However, it is clear that Erikson's identity theory and the entire classical conception of identity development can only form a point of departure today. It has become increasingly visible that these concepts presuppose a society with a degree of stability and common norms and forms of consciousness that no longer exist.

The first important signs of this development were registered by American psychoanalysts as early as the 1960s. They were described in more detail first and foremost by Heinz Kohut (1977) and Otto Kernberg (1975) as 'narcissistic personality disturbances' and 'pathological narcissism', respectively, and in Europe by Thomas Ziehe in his work on puberty and narcissism (Ziehe, 1975). This formed the theoretical foundation of the narcissism debate that, well into the 1980s, played a dominant role in the conception of 'the new youth'.

The starting point of all this was that new types of psychological problems were becoming dominant in the clinical picture emerging in psychoanalytical practice. In contrast to the classical anxiety neuroses, these symptoms were more diffuse and typically were, for example, a lack of self-esteem, feelings of emptiness, a feeling of not really existing, a lack of pleasure in work and of initiative, and an increased tendency towards routine behaviour. In relation to more classical neuroses and psychotic states, it was characteristic that by and large the patients had maintained a coherent self. They were not threatened by self-dissolution, regression or mental fragmentation, but primarily by lacking ego stability, a need to reflect themselves and to gain self-esteem through others, and a fear of losing contact with themselves psychologically.

Therefore their existence was dominated by an urge to avoid getting into situations where the unstable self could be threatened.

At that stage, the concept of identity was included in the narcissism debate to a limited extent only. Nevertheless, it must be viewed as the beginning of a steadily more extensive interest in identity formation. Today these changes apply to most young people up to the age of 25–30 in western capitalist countries, and the discussion about identity formation has developed in many directions. In the following I shall attempt to capture some main trends in this discussion from a perspective concerning the significance of identity for learning and education during youth.

DISSOLUTION TRENDS IN IDENTITY

The most consistent and extreme challenge to the traditional perception of identity was developed during the 1990s within the psychological mode of social constructionism as represented typically by social psychologists such as Kenneth Gergen (1991, 1994) and John Shotter (1993). This mode is fundamentally based on the premise that mental processes and phenomena are developed in social interaction. Thus it is obviously in opposition to the perception of learning outlined here as it only addresses one of the two integrated processes of learning, namely the process of social interaction, while the individual process of mental acquisition is not addressed or, in the most radical formulations, is directly disallowed (corresponding to classical cognitive and behaviourist modes of perception, which only deal with the cognitive dimension of learning).

In the view of social constructionism, identity and the self are also perceived as social constructions that are formed through social interaction and relations, and it is questionable whether one can speak at all of a fixed identity or an authentic self, because when the social situations and contexts change, identity and the self must also do so. Identity takes on an incoherent, situation-determined form with the character of a number of different social roles that the individual assumes or slides into, as a worker, parent, road-user, etc., and the roles do not have to have any inner cohesion. The late-modern person is just as split as the world in which he or she lives.

In his most widely read book, Gergen uses the term 'the saturated self' (Gergen, 1991). This is a self or an identity that is constantly exposed to influences that are so many and varied that the self or identity cannot contain them, at any rate not in any coherent or holistic understanding. It is rather reminiscent of the above-mentioned concept about everyday consciousness, but whereas Leithäuser describes this as a defence system that precisely tries to hold together an identity across the lines of the incoherent influences, in Gergen's perception the defence has definitively broken down and thus a liberation has taken place. Gergen sees no contradictions in this while Leithäuser would probably view it as a fragmentation bordering on the pathological. The question, however, is whether such an extreme dissolution of identity is a reasonable description. At any rate, other current ways of perceiving the situation are also to be found, which, while being aware of the dissolution trends, also note that there still exists a type of inner mental coherence in the individual.

One of these perceptions focuses on the life story or the individual biography as that which holds the individual together mentally and which thus can be said to form

a type of identity (Alheit, 1994; Antikainen et al., 1996; Dominicé, 2000). The self-understanding of the late-modern person is held together by his/her perception or narration of his/her life story. The narration is neither a precise nor a truthful account of the actual life course, but a history developed through the constant interpretation and attribution of significance assigned to events and contexts which one subjectively finds important – in the same way as the identity is a more or less coherent entity which, however, constantly develops and is reinterpreted.

The English sociologist, Anthony Giddens (1991), has a somewhat different perception. While Giddens also refers to the life story as an important element in self-understanding, he places the major emphasis on what he calls 'self-identity', which he defines as 'a reflexively organized endeavour' that includes the maintenance and revision of a coherent life story and of reflexively structured life planning and life-style 'in terms of flows of social and psychological information about possible ways of life'. What is most important in Giddens is thus that the identity is the result of constant reflexive processes where one constructs and reconstructs one's self-perception in the light of impulses from one's surroundings.

In contrast to social constructionism, the life story and the reflexivity-oriented perceptions are characterized by the fact that individuals seek to counter the late-modern trends towards dissolution and fragmentation of the identity by different means that can create a certain inner coherence and continuity. This implies that somewhere 'deep inside' there must be a mental instance, a self or a core identity, from which this resistance or counter-move can derive. Child psychologist Daniel Stern (1985) is of the opinion that even during the first years of life, the child normally develops a 'core self' with crucial significance for further personality development.

From the point of view of learning there is every reason to pay attention to the necessity of such a core identity. This is so, in the first place, because total identity fragmentation or situation identity appears to be an impossible and exaggerated consequence of the dissolution trends of late modernity. In the second place, this is so because it implies that what must be learned and maintained is precisely the duality of both a core identity and extreme flexibility, which must not have the nature of identity confusion but rather that of constant reconstruction.

In the introductory quotation, the students used the phrase that they must constantly listen to their inner voice. Metaphorically, this phrase presupposes the existence of a mental instance within the individual that one can consult and from which one can get an answer that is precisely an expression of oneself or one's identity. The phrase also suggests that today it may be difficult to get into contact with this identity, that it can be hidden under other layers that one must penetrate.

A picture emerges of the tendency for the late-modern person to react by trying to maintain a fairly stable core identity in the face of dissolution trends and demands for flexibility and readiness to change. However, it is also clear that maintaining this core costs willpower; it is under constant external pressure and must be surrounded by layers or structures of a more flexible nature. If the core is really threatened, if the defence cannot withstand the pressure, then symptoms such as those described in connection with narcissism appear and the feeling of losing oneself emerges.

A perception of a core identity surrounded by a layer of more flexible structures also harmonizes with the concept of learning described in this paper, partly because it acknowledges both the social and the individual sides of the mental processes, and

partly because it allows room for both stable patterns and structures and on-going changes through influences and learning, cognitively, emotionally and socially.

On the other hand, it seems unrealistic to imagine total fragmentation or a lack of a stable identity. All the experience that the individual has had throughout childhood and youth with respect to the way in which she or he functions and is regarded in a wide range of different contexts cannot but leave generalized traces about who one is and how one is regarded by others. Even if one feels uncertain and unstable, these can also be elements of an identity. Total emptiness or the lack of authenticity also involve total incapacity and, in the last instance, mental breakdown.

But what do these complicated matters concerning the identity process imply for young people and their behaviour, for example in education programmes?

IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT AND SELF-ORIENTATION

Classical identity formation can, as in Erikson (1968) for example, be described as a gradual forward-moving process with many sub-processes and side-tracks, but nevertheless leading step by step to a more or less stable identity that not only involves self-esteem and self-knowledge but also the laying out of guidelines and preferences with respect to working life, family life, conception of society and interests, which basically should function as the foundation of the future existence.

All of this is as such still present and functions as a type of ideal or guideline for young people. At any rate, this is the way they would like to experience it. Most of them, for example, would like to aim towards a permanent job and a stable relationship with children and family life in good surroundings with good friends and interests that engage them. But at the same time young people fully realize that the world is not like that any more, society is changing from one day to the next, an education is always merely provisional, and, as a rule, relationships are only permanent for a time (Simonsen, 2000). It is therefore absolutely necessary also to be prepared for the changeable and unpredictable – the only thing one can predict is unpredictability.

This situation is reflected in the development task typically facing a young person today. Young people must at one and the same time develop a reasonably stable and sustainable core identity and simultaneously be able, practically and mentally, to handle an enormous variability, a risk society in which one can never be sure of anything (compare again with the introductory quotation).

This is a huge and completely incalculable task which earlier generations find difficult to fully understand. The way in which young people approach this task has probably been formulated most precisely by Ziehe in the term 'search processes' (Ziehe and Stubenrauch, 1982). Young people typically become involved in a continuous, limitless search within the varied fields of opportunity that face them. They try out one thing after another with respect to absolutely everything such as friendships, relationships, sexuality, alcohol, drugs, interests, activities, competitions, sports, music, education, and ways of living, and they move around globally either on the internet and through the media, or directly by travelling. Everything is of interest and a great deal is rejected, but the field of opportunity is still huge – at any rate as it is experienced by the individual – and every choice one makes is only temporary, because another choice can always be made, and very often is made.

Instead of identity development, a concept that refers back to a context that no longer exists, there is reason to find a new term for this comprehensive process. Here I will use the term *self-orientation* which is suitable for capturing the fact that this is a very wide-ranging process where one orients oneself with a view to finding oneself, one's options, ways of functioning and preferences, gradually building up a certain core identity and some rationales for all the choices with which one is constantly presented. On the basis of this concept of self-orientation, in conclusion I will attempt to sum up the way in which young people today typically function in relation to learning and qualification through education and other activities.

IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT AND EDUCATION

It is clear that today education is very central to the lives and consciousness of young people, and studies also show that young people are very prepared and basically positive about the need to educate and qualify themselves (Simonsen, 2000). But the old question, 'What are you going to be when you grow up?', has now taken on dimensions that are quite boundless, partly because it has become more a question of 'Who can I be?' than 'What can I be?', and partly because young people are presented with lists of thousands of educational and occupational choices at the same time as, from earliest childhood, they have learned that it is a matter of choosing what is absolutely right for one personally, what they really want, what can help to realize their personal talents and preferences. The opportunities are there and all you have to do is to make your very own choice, find precisely what you are enthusiastic about, and what can make you happy.

This is where the search processes get underway, and must do so, because the apparently free choice situation is essentially both impossible and untrue. In the first place, freedom of choice is an illusion. A great number of personal and social prerequisites are demanded, there is competition for places, there are things that the individual cannot manage, situations that are unbearable, and it is anything but certain that happiness lies at the end of the path one has entered.

In more traditional sociological terminology, it would be said that 'in reality' and 'behind the backs' of the young an extensive, widely diversified sorting process takes place. But young people do not look at it in this way. Their point of departure is more subjective and they experience it precisely as a search. 'What am I really enthusiastic about?', is the most fundamental question to which very few can give an even vaguely grounded answer. However, since one must choose something or other, one embarks on a course that may prove good. It may turn out that it is not particularly interesting or profitable, it may be boring – and this is often the most negative experience of all – or there may be practical difficulties, or one does not like the teacher or foreman, or one's friends are not fantastic. There can be many reasons as to why the choice made does not live up to one's expectations, and then it is a matter of stopping, the sooner the better, because it is not about finding something that is just bearable or acceptable. It is always about finding what is exactly right, what one can really be enthusiastic about. In addition, one must always consult oneself because in the final analysis it is only within oneself that the yardstick is to be found.

These search processes obviously demand a great deal from young people. They must constantly have their antennae spread to capture and decode the signals

according to which they can navigate. Naturally, the content of an education or activity is important because under no circumstances may this be experienced as boring. But just as important are the people involved: the teachers, co-workers, friends, the group. One has to get on with them really well, and they must be stimulating and positive, at the same time as one must count for something among them – one must be visible and be confirmed. And then there are all the circumstances from the physical and social environment to the practical rules and regulations, work hours, etc. All of these things count and they must be assessed and weighted. The chosen activity must be re-chosen every day.

This, of course, also demands a great deal of the surroundings, of teachers, managers and institutions, because they are constantly being judged, in fact being judged twice over, as they have to meet the expectations of participants who will otherwise drop out, and they must simultaneously live up to the outer demands, which are typically expressed in endless different kinds of evaluations. Not very long ago a study programme was adequate if the teaching was academically accountable and the other conditions were regulated – and in many cases this yardstick is still at work in the minds of managers and teachers in the area. In this case, the study programme is the yardstick and those who cannot accept or meet the challenges must find something else.

But for young people today, the yardstick is quite different – it is the needs and feelings of the individual. This cannot be changed; our whole society would have to go back 30 years or more. One can support and help and provide guidance, and this can be a good thing and save a lot of difficult situations if it is done sensitively and with understanding. But one cannot shift the yardstick, the rationale of what is right or wrong. Ever since our children were small, we adults have repeatedly told them that the most important thing is to choose whatever feels exactly right – the red soda and not the green one, the activities that are exciting and not boring.

For good and for bad, we live in a society that is fundamentally designed as a market society. In such a society in the final analysis it is the consumers' choices that are decisive, and this also applies to study programmes and, within the individual programmes, for the choices between subjects, activities, teachers and supervisors. On the other hand, this independence is intolerable for society. We cannot have thousands of superfluous designers, actors, pop stars and studio hosts while we lack home helps, cleaners and engineers.

This is why regulation and sorting must take place as a counter weight to the free search processes, and in a market society consumer patterns are influenced by making commodities more attractive. This can take place by means of product development, i.e. by making study programmes and occupations more attractive to the young. It can also take place through marketing and through better sales personnel. We might just as well face up to the fact that any job in the education sector today carries with it extensive involvement in these types of activities, even though we use other words that fit in better with the self-perception that is dominant in the education systems.

But seen from the perspective of young people, these counter moves only make the situation even more complicated and incalculable. The education sections of the newspapers contain not only long lists of possible study programmes but also more and more advertisements in which schools and systems try to make themselves as attractive as possible. This increases the need for search processes and it also

increases the risk of making choices that prove to be wrong. But there is no denying the fact that the basis of existence for the study programmes is the intake of participants.

The processes that I have chosen to call self-orientation are thus unavoidable for young people, and fundamentally it is on this basis that they make their choices, and experience and assess the study programmes, the subjects and all other activities that can contribute to their development and qualification. If one deals with youth education and other activities for young people today, it is vital to understand that the young continuously assess them and relate to them on the basis of their contribution and value with respect to self-orientation. Young people meet every activity with the questions: 'What does this mean for me? What part does it play in my self-orientation? What use can I make of it in my current self-development project?'

In addition, even if academic content can be of central importance in relation to a desired qualification or education, it is not relevant if the young cannot themselves see and experience its relevance in relation to self-orientation. For this reason, teachers, supervisors and other representatives of the study programmes are forced into the roles of product developers, marketers and salesmen. If, in their opinion, the content in question is to retain the status they attribute to it, they must be able to convince the young people that this is the case. They must be able to do even more than that, because young people do not only want to be convinced, they want to be filled with enthusiasm. Some may call this popular pedagogics or show pedagogics. But this is not actually the case. The appeal would quickly disappear if personal engagement, the feeling of an enthusiastic self, could not be felt in the background, just as young people themselves want to be fired up and be enthusiastic about what they do.

Self-orientation has become the unavoidable condition for youth education. This self-orientation can be extremely exhausting and almost create dependency for the individual; one must go on, one cannot escape from it because new opportunities always arise. It is very difficult to say that one has come through it, and from this point of view the young are really geared to 'lifelong learning'. Some of them manage – those who are equipped to deal with the conditions of late-modern society. They could also be identified as precisely those who develop a core identity that is sufficiently stable and consistent to be able to deal with constant changes and new developments. They have a central core that can provide useful answers when one 'listens to one's inner voice'. Others find it difficult to get to this point. Their search movements continue to be diffuse. They perhaps correspond more to the social constructionists' descriptions of the fragmented self. Their core identity is too disjointed and unstable to be able to handle the tempting offers and unpredictability of their surroundings. It is they whom the English sociologist Scott Lash terms the 'reflexive losers' of late modernity (Lash, 1994: 130). They are unable to handle the reflexivity and self-understanding necessary to manage self-orientation.

And many, perhaps the majority, are probably somewhere in between. Their self-orientation takes them far enough for them to be able to manage, but there is also an underlying feeling of things not being quite as good as they should be. They manage but they have not captured the happiness they have been promised and to which they think they have a right. They have never found 'perfection' and they still do not know what this is. Under all circumstances, it is self-orientation that lays down the fundamental human conditions for the education and qualification activities of young people today.

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